

Pandemic Flu

For Servicemembers and their Families

Important Facts

- Pandemic flu, also known as pandemic influenza, is a global outbreak of flu that occurs when a new flu virus appears in people, causes serious illness, and spreads easily from person to person.
- On average, pandemics occur about every 30 to 40 years. The last pandemic flu occurred in 1968, and medical experts believe one may occur sometime in the near future.
- Because flu vaccines are produced from known viruses, a vaccine to prevent a new flu virus may not be available during the early stages of a pandemic. People of all ages may be at risk for serious illness, including death.
- Influenza is spread in the air by respiratory droplets from coughs and sneezes and by direct contact with these droplets.
- To prevent the spread of influenza:
 - Stay away from people who are sick
 - If you feel sick, stay at home
 - Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze
 - If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve, not your hands
 - Wash your hands frequently, especially after coughing or sneezing

What is pandemic flu?

Pandemic flu is a global outbreak of flu that occurs when a new flu virus appears in people, causes serious illness, and spreads easily from person to person. A pandemic is a global outbreak of disease, while an epidemic is a widespread or regional outbreak. During the 20th Century, new influenza viruses caused three pandemics, the most recent in 1968. The most severe was the 1918-1919 "Spanish Flu", which caused more than 500,000 deaths in the United States and 20-40 million deaths worldwide. Nearly half of those who died were young, healthy adults.

Is pandemic flu the same as avian flu?

No. Pandemic flu is the term for a global outbreak of a new flu virus in people. Avian flu is a term for an outbreak of flu commonly found in birds.

The avian flu strain H5N1 is the virus currently considered to be the most likely to cause a new flu pandemic.

See Avian Flu fact sheet:

<http://deploymenthealthlibrary.fhp.osd.mil/products/dhsd/AvianFlu.pdf>

The first documented human cases of H5N1 avian flu were found in 1997 when six people were infected and died in Hong Kong during a large outbreak of influenza among poultry. Beginning in late 2003, outbreaks among poultry were reported throughout Southeast Asia with extension into Central Asia, Russia, and Eastern Europe.

Scattered human cases of H5N1 avian flu have occurred among people who had direct contact with sick poultry or who ate undercooked poultry infected with the virus. So far, spread of H5N1 avian flu virus has been rare and has not continued beyond one person.

How is pandemic flu different from ordinary, seasonal flu?

Seasonal flu occurs each winter and is caused by human flu viruses that are similar to those that circulated among people during previous flu seasons. Seasonal flu usually affects about 10 to 15% of the population, it is unpleasant, but is rarely life threatening. Deaths caused by seasonal flu usually occur in elderly and other high-risk groups such as the very young and those with some pre-existing medical conditions. About 36,000 Americans die each year from seasonal flu.

In contrast, flu pandemics occur rarely (about every 30-40 years) and are caused by new flu viruses that have not circulated widely among people before. These new viruses usually affect all age groups and up to 50% of the population. They frequently cause serious illness or death because people have little or no immunity against them.

How are flu viruses transmitted?

Close contact with an infected person who is coughing and sneezing can easily spread flu virus in the air from person to person. This happens when spit or saliva from a sick person comes in contact with the eyes, nose, or mouth of another person. The virus can also be transmitted when a person touches respiratory droplets on a surface and then touches his or her eyes, mouth or nose. [Note: It is important to remember that the H5N1 avian flu virus has not developed the ability to spread from person to person.]

Flu has a short incubation period, meaning most people will feel symptoms within about three days of exposure. A person may spread the virus to others for up to two days

before he or she begins to feel sick. Once symptoms appear (fever, muscle aches, cough, etc.), adults may continue to spread the virus to others for about 5 days (longer for children). The ability to infect others early in the illness, even before you know you are sick, allows the flu virus to spread rapidly.

Is there a vaccine or other treatment for pandemic flu?

A pandemic flu is caused by a new flu virus. Therefore, an effective vaccine may not be available in the early stages of a pandemic. After the new strain of flu virus is identified, it may take six to eight months before a vaccine is widely available. Once the vaccine is available, a person will require two doses of vaccine to develop immunity to the virus.

In the case of H5N1 avian flu, a vaccine is currently undergoing clinical trials and should be available in the near future. However, because the H5N1 virus is continually changing, if the virus does start a pandemic in the future, the vaccine may not be very effective.

In the absence of a vaccine, antiviral drugs may reduce the severity of the illness. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved four different influenza antiviral medications for the treatment and/or prevention of flu. Current supplies of these drugs are limited. The DoD's top priority for the use of vaccine or antiviral medications is for forward deployed operational forces.

What can I do to avoid catching and spreading the flu?

- Get the seasonal flu vaccine. This is particularly important for high-risk groups (the very young, old, and those with chronic diseases) to decrease the overall risk of viral infection and possible complications.
- If you feel sick, stay at home and away from others. Stay away from people who are sick.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and put your used tissue in the wastebasket.

If you do not have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve or the inner part of your elbow, not in your hands.

- Wash your hands frequently, especially after coughing or sneezing. Wash with soap and water or clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand cleaner. In addition, avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth as much as possible.
- Get regular exercise, enough rest, and eat healthy, balanced meals. Because tobacco use has been associated with a greater risk of severe complications from certain lung infections, you should avoid smoking.
- As an added disease-prevention measure, persons 65 years of age or older, should consult with a healthcare provider to be immunized with pneumococcal (pneumonia) vaccine, as should people with chronic or other special risk factors.

What is being done to prepare for a flu pandemic?

Current planning for pandemic flu includes improving surveillance and monitoring for the appearance of new flu viruses, stockpiling of antiviral drugs, use of new vaccines when available, and improving communications about this threat, including its prevention.

Military Treatment Facilities have response plans for public health emergencies, including pandemic flu, that are coordinated with local health departments. Additionally, at each installation, Public Health Emergency Officers are key figures in emergency response plans.

More information on pandemic flu can be obtained from the Department of Health and Human Services at: www.pandemicflu.gov and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian>

Where Do I Get More Information?

DOD Deployment Health Support Directorate (DHSD)
Phone: (800) 497-6261
<http://www.deploymentlink.osd.mil>

Air Force Institute for Operational Health (AFIOH)
Phone: (888) 232-3764
<http://www.brooks.af.mil/afioh/>

U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine (USACHPPM)
Phone: (800) 222-9698
<http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil>

DOD Deployment Health Clinical Center (DHCC)
Phone: (866) 559-1627
<http://www.pdhealth.mil/>

Navy Environmental Health Center (NEHC)
Phone: (757) 953-0700
<http://www.nehc.med.navy.mil>

Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)
Pandemic Flu web page
<http://pandemicflu.gov/>



Visit the Deployment Health and Family Readiness Library: <http://deploymenthealthlibrary.fhp.osd.mil>

A collaborative effort between the Air Force Institute for Operational Health, the Deployment Health Clinical Center, the Deployment Health Support Directorate, the Navy Environmental Health Center, the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine, and the OUSD(P&R)/Military Family and Community Policy